IN POINT OF FACT

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DRUG DEPENDENCE AND ABUSE: THE GLOBAL SITUATION

Trends

* Drug abuse is worsening rapidly around the globe, in both developed and developing countries. In many countries, drug abuse has today become one of the major causes of health and social problems. Counting all those who abuse drugs, or are dependent on them, the world total could be in the hundreds of millions. Although it is difficult to quantify the number of persons abusing drugs, the United Nations has estimated that there are over five million injecting drug users in the world.

* There has been a continued escalation of cocaine, heroin and methaqualone abuse, although the abuse of cannabis, amphetamine-type substances, benzodiazepines and sedative-hypnotics has also reached high levels in many countries. Heroin abuse continues to pose serious problems in North America and Western Europe, in a number of countries in Asia and the Far East and Oceania, as well as in certain countries in the Near and Middle East. The abuse of cocaine has risen sharply in North America and Europe, while use of the cocaine derivative "crack" is escalating sharply. Designer drugs have also appeared in the United States and have spread to many other countries, posing another threat. The abuse of psychoactive drugs such as tranquilizers, depressants and stimulants of the central nervous system is also a problem, affecting the health of the peoples in both developed and developing countries.

* Drug abuse knows no boundaries of social class, sex or age. Drug abuse is increasingly affecting young people in both industrialized and developing countries. Children and adolescents are becoming involved in drug abuse at an earlier age than before. Although the majority of persons using or abusing drugs are males, the proportion of women abusing drugs continues to increase in both developed and developing countries. An increasing number of infants are being born in the developed world already addicted to drugs such as heroin, or cocaine.

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* In the Americas, and recently in Asia, injecting drug users have become increasingly vulnerable to infection with HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus which causes AIDS. Intravenous drug users represent a large proportion of reported AIDS cases on the East Coast of the United States and in southern Europe, especially in Spain and Italy. In Asia, extensive spread of HIV infection among drug users has been documented in Thailand, and HIV infection has also been found among intravenous drug users in Rangoon, Myanmar. Thus, the global epidemic of drug use threatens to expose new populations to explosive HIV spread.

* Abuse of drugs is a growing problem in all regions of WHO. In Africa, government reports indicate a deterioration in the drug abuse situation. Problems with cannabis have escalated in recent years due to the abuse of narcotic drugs, such as heroin and cocaine. In the Americas, the abuse of cocaine, cannabis and multiple drugs, often involving alcohol and psychotropic substances, continued to increase. In Asia and the Far East, heroin abuse has continued to increase, reaching epidemic proportions in some countries. In Europe, the main problem is the abuse by injection of heroin, with cocaine and amphetamine use rising rapidly. In the Near and Middle East, cannabis abuse is now accompanied by use of heroin in several countries.

The Role of WHO

* Reduction in the health and social problems caused by drug abuse is an essential part of the WHO mandate for achieving the objective of Health for all by the year 2000. Within the total response to drug abuse, the health element deserves greater prominence because it is precisely the health sector which can play a key role in mobilizing, supporting and sustaining effective action to reduce demand at international, national and community levels.

* WHO advises the Secretary General of the United Nations on psychoactive substances, which create public health and social problems. For example, designer drugs, captagon and pemoline, are recent examples.

* WHO is uniquely placed to lead the global efforts of health, science, medicine and social services against drug abuse and dependence. The three main objectives of WHO's global action to reduce drug abuse are:

  * preventing the spread of drug abuse in individuals, families, communities and countries;
  * developing effective approaches to the treatment of drug dependence and associated diseases;
  * collaborating in controlling the supply of licit psychoactive substances.

* Within the context of its current programme for preventing and controlling drug abuse, WHO has promoted or carried out activities, including:

  * Monitoring the world situation with respect to the use and abuse of psychoactive substances.

  * Reviewing the health consequences of different drug control policies.

  * Assessing the effectiveness of health promotion to reduce drug abuse.

  * Developing special programmes for adolescents, and for use in the workplace and at community level.

  * Assessing the quality of care in drug dependence treatment.

  * Preparing training materials for use in primary health care.

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* Analysing the use of methadone in the treatment of opiate dependence;

* Improving the handling of drug-related problems in emergency rooms.

* Testing interventions designed to prevent HIV-related risk-taking behaviour among drug users.

* Assessing the abuse potential and medical usefulness of psychoactive drugs and recommending a proper level of international control to be applied under existing conventions.

* Building upon policy development at country and regional levels, WHO will seek to establish and maintain more effective linkages with other United Nations bodies, such as the U.N. Division of Narcotic Drugs, the International Narcotics Control Board and the U.N. Fund for Drug Abuse Control, on activities related to the prevention and control of drug abuse.

* WHO plans to intensify its activities at all levels in the fight against drug abuse. This process will be begun by an intensification of current programmes, utilizing the existing resources of the Organization. Given the vast scale of the problem and the urgent need to mobilize a whole range of different activities, there is a longer-term need for substantially increased resources globally for the fight against drugs.